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SUBJECT: Tourism Part II: An Examination of Agrotourism

Ref: Minsk (1079)

Sensitive But Unclassified

11. Summary: (U) The GOB has a two-part program for tourism: to increase tourism within Belarus by Belarusians and to increase the number of foreign tourists to Belarus. On September 3 and 4, Emboffs set off to test the tourism waters, starting with an overnight at an agrotourism farm. They also visited two of Belarus' top tourist sites to assess the prospects for increasing foreign tourism in Belarus. The future of agrotourism is promising. However, the same assessment cannot be made about the prospects for increasing foreign tourism. End summary.

Agrotourism

12. (U) On September 3, Emboffs bravely boarded their 1970s bus to the town of Mir, approximately two hours outside of Minsk, to stay at a bed and breakfast on a farm. Their hostess, Anna Kitun, met them at the bus station and drove them to the farm. While taking a tour of the farm, the hostess explained that she and her husband started hosting tourists two years ago as a source of additional income. They already have a two-story house for guests, as well as a wooden cottage nearby with beds for six people and a tent-like structure with a hay bed, for those who prefer more of a camping experience. The bed and breakfast owners built the lodging accommodations and the full banya themselves, and they supply food from their own livestock and garden. Business has picked up so much that the couple is building another guest cottage. Most of their guests are Belarusian, and Emboffs were the first Americans to visit the farm.

13. (U) During the meal of traditional Belarusian foods, young Belarusian guests asked Emboffs for their opinion of Belarus. Emboffs replied that Belarus is nice, which motivated one guest to give a small lecture on politics: "That's not what the television says. The television says that America hates Belarus because it's a dictatorship. It isn't a dictatorship. Life here is good. The country is stable, and there's no terrorism. We don't have any more problems here than you have in your own country." After the meal and political lecture, hosts took Emboffs to a neighboring farm where Emboffs paid USD 1 each to milk a cow.

The "Big" Tourist Sites

¶4. (U) In the town of Mir, Emboffs toured a castle. Price listings were in Russian only, although explanatory signs in the one accessible tower of the castle were in Russian and English. Then Emboffs waited three hours for the next bus to visit the castle in Neszvich. There were no maps of the town and no signs pointing the way to the site. The castle is in such an advanced state of disrepair that none of the buildings are open to the public. The entry fee allows tourists to walk through the castle gates and stand in the courtyard amidst scaffolding and cement mixers. [Note: on July 15, UNESCO added Neszvich castle to its World Heritage List, so hope of restoration exists.]

Comment

¶5. (SBU) Emboffs' experience with agrotourism exceeded post expectations (reftel). The lodging accommodations on the farm were completely booked, hosts were friendly and helpful, the food was tasty, and the room was clean. For Belarusians or for foreign tourists already in Belarus, agrotourism is an excellent way to spend a weekend. However, because of the poor public transportation system and the need to obtain a tourist visa, foreign tourists would have to be determined to experience Belarusian village and agricultural life.

¶6. (SBU) However, the site-seeing part of the tourism weekend revealed a complete lack of tourist infrastructure: no directional or informational signs (in any language), no maps, and no toilets. To attract foreign tourists to Belarus, information at the major tourist sites should be available in English and perhaps in German. Moreover, buses would need to be updated and should run more than twice a day between the two towns with castles. End comment.

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